





BLACK ATTACK!

Or, how money, star availability and "scripting issues" almost KO'd the scumbag of the MIBs.

WORDS SIMON BRAUND AND MATT COYTE

In a dark, difficult world, grown men amuse themselves by playing with puppets.



Back In Black” is the suitably sartorial tagline for *Men In Black II*, the deliriously anticipated follow-up to 1997’s sly sci-fi smash. And for Will Smith, reprising his role as secret agent James Darrel “Jay” Edwards III, was as comfortable as slipping into an old suit.

“Absolutely,” Smith yelps. “That’s perfect. There was a certain sense of coming home on this film that made every day fun. Any time your job is to sit around with your

friends, be silly all day long, and get paid for it, well – God bless America!”

Smith is flying the flag for *MIB II* on a world promo tour, and he’s infectiously upbeat, as well he might be; but back in Hollywood, taking a breather from last-minute post-production chores, Barry Sonnenfeld, director of both *MIB* movies, is more circumspect.

“The sequel was hard to get going,” Sonnenfeld explains. “A total sense of fear existed

expected anything. This time, everyone was nervous. And that was no fun.”

The pressure is understandable. Opening on the July 4th weekend, 1997, the original *MIB* set a five-day box office record with a take of \$US85 million and went on to gross almost \$US600 million worldwide. Those are the sort of numbers that would make anyone dizzy.

Five years separate *MIB II* from the original, a long gestation period for a no-brainer sequel in a potential franchise. The fact that the cash-cow potential wasn’t pounced on earlier is a further indication that suiting up for the latest installment wasn’t the casual undertaking Smith suggests.

“I didn’t see how Sony could find a way to allow Will, I, and Tommy Lee Jones to share in the profits,” says Sonnenfeld. “None of us had any of the gross from the first movie. I didn’t see how they could make a sequel and make it work financially. Not because they didn’t want to share, but these things are so complicated. It took five years to figure it out.”

Smith concurs. “We all knew that we wanted to make this movie, and this is not the kind of team that is going to stop a film getting made because of the money. But there are so many players involved, it takes time to make all the deals. Plus it takes a

“Everyone was nervous and that was no fun.”

BARRY SONNENFELD

even with a supportive studio like Sony. Also, *MIB* came out under the radar. The big movies that summer were meant to be *Batman & Robin* and *The Lost World*, so we were able to do our movie and no one



Lara Flynn Boyle

She's come from outer space to destroy the Earth – and she's exhausted...

Lara Flynn Boyle, who stars as Serleena, *MIB2*'s super-villain, is dead tired. On a whirlwind world tour to promote the film before flying back to the US to shoot another season of *The Practice*, *Empire* finds her feeling a little worse for wear. The arduous schedule has done nothing to dampen her spirits, though, and we can't help but feel that a nuclear war couldn't stop her from flirting with us...

MIB2 seems to be a liberating experience for the 32-year-old star. Gone are the suit jackets and sensible shoes of *The Practice*. Serleena is an *uber-vixen* – all cleavage and black leather. When we put it to Lara that this could be filling a void in her life, she agrees. "Absolutely. You get stuck in the monotony of doing one thing, just like any job and you need a break from it. I also feel drama can be a little more self indulgent. The first thing that they teach you in acting school is that anybody can cry – that doesn't make you a good actor. I just find that going into comedy is so much more challenging."

And she doesn't get to tear her top open on *The Practice*. "No, which is a bummer, I keep saying, 'This is TV, but can't we sex it up a little?'" Which brings us to the subject of the tabloid criticism of Miss Boyle's weight. Needless to say, critics of her "lollipop" build will be pleased at her new curves. Indeed, she assures us that her breasts are one of the few bits of *MIB2* that haven't been hit with the CGI brush. "Oh! Well I wish they were. It was just a lot of padding and pushing and pulling. Barry Sonnenfeld says they pulled my cleavage from my knees (*much laughter*). I've always said that a lot of women are very thin, but if they have large breasts, no one seems to mind. I don't have a breast job so I seem to get picked on a lot for it."

And what of the green screen acting? "You really feel like you're making an ass of yourself. I kept saying to Barry, 'Are you sure I'm not gonna look like an idiot?'" He said, 'I promise you, you're gonna look super cool.'" You do, Lara, you do.

Matt Coyte

Alien sex fiend:
Lara Flynn Boyle.

"And if I do this, I can make him cha-cha."

The master builder, effects legend Rick Baker.

Amazingly, neither trained agent noticed the alien but a metre from them.

while for everybody to be available, and to have something that everyone feels is worthy of the title *MIB II*."

Whatever the fine details of the deal were, it's hardly unreasonable of Sonnenfeld, Smith and Jones to expect a slice of the pie. That said, when a sequel was first mooted, there was no guarantee Sonnenfeld was going to be involved.

"Walter Parkes and Laurie MacDonald [*the producers*] decided they were going to spend the money on a script, but they weren't sure they were going to get me to direct. They had a script written, which I was not involved in at all, and they sent it to me." It was certainly not, he felt, a script worthy of the title *Men In Black II*.

Sonnenfeld continues: "I read the script and Tommy's character didn't appear until page 54. I said, 'Listen, guys, you don't want that.' They said, 'No, it's great; we've got other stuff. We've got Will kind of being Tommy Lee.' I said, 'First of all, what worked in the first film was not just Will; it was Will *and* Tommy. And second, I did a movie called *Wild, Wild West* where, because I broke my own rule for comedy by hiring two funny men, I had to have Will play the straight man. People do not want to see Will Smith play the straight man for 54 pages.' I worked really hard and eventually got Tommy in much earlier, but

it was still a matter of raging disagreement between myself and the producers."

The script Sonnenfeld eventually signed on to direct is set five years on from episode one. Jay is now the big man on the alien beat, but even he is no match for a tentacle-sprouting gorgon called Serleena (Lara Flynn Boyle), who disguises herself as a lingerie model. Thus Kay – "retired" at the end of *MIB* and sent to work for the US Postal Service, but the one person who knows the secret of Serleena's mission – must be re-teamed with his apprentice and sent back into the field.

It's a smart premise and, one would think, a fairly obvious one. Sonnenfeld is absolutely right when he says it was the repartee between Smith and Jones that gave *MIB* its comic backbone. Sitting through the sequel without their double-act would've been unthinkable. >

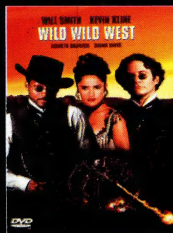
Two out of three ain't bad...

Empire chronicles the rocky big screen Smith/Sonnenfeld relationship.

MIB
MEN IN BLACK

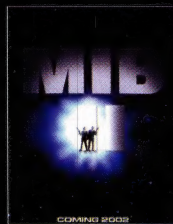
Men In Black (1997) – The original teaming of the Fresh Prince with crotchety straight-shooter Tommy Lee Jones was a roaring success for the wiley ex-porno director. Huge at the movies and even bigger on DVD, *MIB* is one of the most

successful films of the '90s. High on the success of *MIB* and flooded with high-profile project offers, Sonnenfeld agreed to make the film which will be a thorn in his side for the rest of his career.



Wild, Wild, West (1999) – a film famous only for possibly having lost more money than any other movie ever made. It's quite a claim to fame, and we're sure that Big Willy's glad that Sonnenfeld

decided to take him along for the ride. Whether it was the pay packets of Smith, Kevin Kline, or Kenneth Branagh, or the mountain-sized mechanical spider that pushed this quite innovative western comedy over the edge, we'll never know.



Men In Black II (2002)

– the pair go back to what they know best – men in shiny suits and slimy aliens. Sit back and watch the money role in.

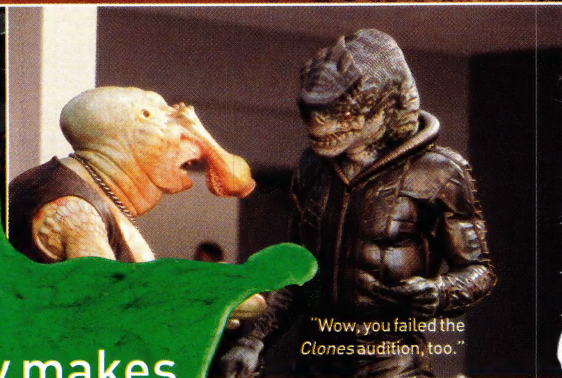
Matt Coyte



"Carry on with your business, there's nothing to see here."



ILM prove why they're worth the big bucks.



"Wow, you failed the Clones audition, too."

"Kay makes Jay"
WILL SMITH

"The great thing was," says Sonnenfeld, "that Will sensed it, too. The first few weeks, I only had Will. Everything was going fine; it wasn't so much fun but it wasn't unpleasant. The first scene we shot with the two of them was at

Grand Central Station where they go to a locker filled with this race of creatures who worship Tommy as their god. When we got done, Will came up to me, grinning, and said, "Kay makes Jay!" Well, yeah, he does."

Smith remembers the incident well. "The first time Tommy Lee and I were on the set together it was 10 times easier. The character of Kay really created the character of Jay. The second he walked on set, everything came flooding back."

For Sonnenfeld, having Smith and Jones around distracted him from the unease he felt over the whole notion of a sequel. "One of the things that was successful about the first movie was that people felt it was original," he says. "And you can't make a sequel about originality. By definition, you're going to need some of the things from the first one. People think they want to see *MIB II* because they liked *MIB*.

But a lot of what they liked about it

is what I can't deliver. You can't just do a bunch of 'Guess who you thought was human but turns out to be an alien' gags.

That doesn't work."

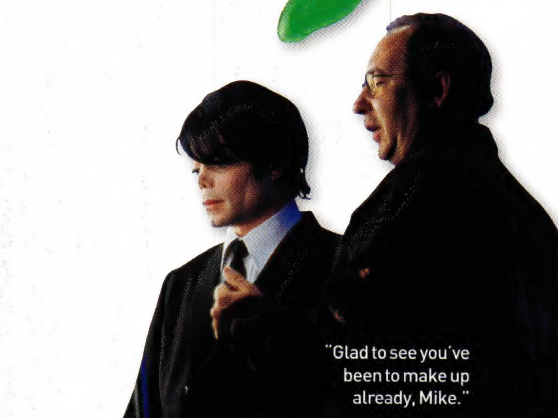
So, what does? "What does work is Tommy and Will. I love Will and I love working with him, but what I really enjoyed was that, on this film, Tommy realised how funny he was. The first one, he didn't know that. He wasn't sure he trusted what I was doing. I think he felt like I was trying to make him not funny so that Will could be funny."

Which would probably be most directors' objective. But if there's one thing that characterises Sonnenfeld's approach to comedy, it's that the situations are funny, not the performers. He's notorious for instructing his actors, even renowned jokers like Smith, to deliver their lines dead straight. "For me," he says, "Tommy is not unlike Christina Ricci in *The Addams Family* (his directorial debut). I told him the same thing I told her, 'Say the lines as flat as you can and with as little attitude as possible.'

"Something I firmly believe in is letting the audience find the comedy. Most movies feed the audience too much. We don't make them work, and they get bored. I was trying to make Tommy a different kind of funny, which is to not be funny. ➤



A split-shift worker.



"Glad to see you've been to make up already, Mike."

And you look like one too...

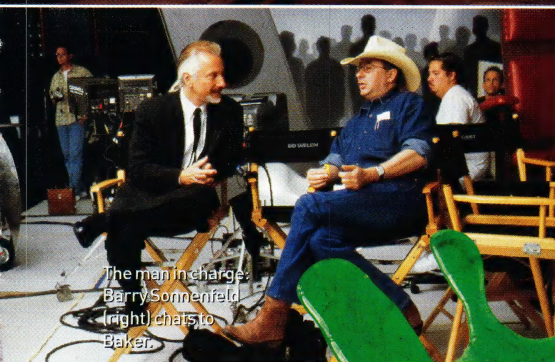
Empire rates "Wacko" Jacko's *MIBII* cameo.

Tongues have been wagging lately that Michael "Wacko" Jackson has squandered his millions on absolute rubbish and is desperately trying to get a leg up in the movie business. With the commercial failure of his latest album and his inability to do anything financially viable with any of his investments (he owns the rights to a large number of Beatles songs) this seems more likely to be fact than rumour. He has also been rather active in the film-rumour mill, with reports of a movie in the works starring himself and Liza Minelli, as well as a werewolf movie, harking back to his early love of creature features. In a move that will do little to quash these rumours, Wacko has a cameo role in the latest *MIB* film.

Teaming up with his old pal Rick Baker (who also designed the ground-breaking visual effects for Jackson's mini-movie/music video *Thriller*), he appears briefly as himself, applying (obviously for the umpteenth time) to be a member of the

Men In Black. Flashing up on a giant screen above the MIB headquarters control room, he pesters Chief Zed (Rip Torn) for a job, claiming that he knows plenty of aliens and that he'd be perfect for the job. This will come as a disappointment to Jacko's nay-sayers and might suggest that his freakish visage would leave him better suited to an appearance as an actual alien. Indeed, his lilting voice and tightly stretched skin are nothing short of frightening, and his cameo should have earned the film an R-rating – if there's any justice in this cruel world. And how's his acting? In a word – terrible. Not quite as bad as he was in *Moonwalker*, but he really is a freak of epic proportions. The look on Rip Torn's face says "Yuck, kill it!"

Matt Coyte



The man in charge: Barry Sonnenfeld (right) chats to Baker.



ILM risk Grinch copyright infringement case.

I think Tommy loved being in the theatre and hearing people laugh at what he was doing. He came in on this one loving that he was doing a comedy, loving his character, and knowing this time that when he was doing nothing, he was actually doing a wonderful job."

Jones has his own, inimitable take on this. "I don't have a sense of humour of any recognisable kind," he says, wryly. "I've been very lucky because often my mark is right next to Will's. So, the key to being funny for me is to stand as close to Will Smith as possible and do everything Barry tells me to do. It appears, on some occasions, I've gotten away with that."

For Smith, coming straight off *Ali*, the challenge was exactly the opposite. "It was difficult going from such a dramatic film to a really light, effects comedy," he says. "It took a while to get my head settled back into it. At first, I was overthinking the scenes, trying to figure out what the aliens' motivation was. Oh, and I did have a few problems fitting into the suit," he admits. "I bulked up for *Ali* and it took me a few weeks to get down to my

"Tommy's a different kind of funny."

BARRY SONNENFELD

normal size." With Smith and Jones back in black, to say nothing of a scantily clad Lara Flynn Boyle and a clutch of new aliens courtesy of make-up maestro Rick Baker and the wizards at ILM, surely any lingering

doubts Barry Sonnenfeld might have about *MIB II*'s ability to live up to its predecessor are unfounded. This is a film with \$US300 million written all over it. Isn't it?

"Okay, maybe," he concedes, "I don't know. I don't want to say anything about that. They're all your babies and you want to love them whether they make money or not."

But is he happy with the film? "Yeah, I am," he says, before hurrying back to the editing suite.

◆ *Men In Black II* is released nationally on July 4 and is reviewed on page 50.



Small dogs: bloody annoying.